Commentaries and Rejoinder to "The Dishonesty of Honest People"

Hypermotivation

*SCOTT RICK and GEORGE LOEWENSTEIN**

In their clever and insightful article, Mazar, Amir, and Ariely (2008) propose that people balance two competing desires when deciding whether to behave dishonestly: the motivation for personal gain and the desire to maintain a positive self-concept. Their studies focus on the latter factor, showing that people behave dishonestly when it pays, but only to the extent that they can do so without violating their perception of themselves as honest. The research is innovative and important. It has already had an influence on policies dealing with conflicts of interest in medicine (Association of American Medical Colleges 2007) and, even before its own publication, has spawned significant follow-up research (Vohs and Schooler 2008).

In our opinion, the main limitation of Mazar, Amir, and Ariely's article is not in the perspective it presents but rather in what it leaves out. Although it is important to understand the psychology of rationalization, the other factor that Mazar, Amir, and Ariely recognize but then largely ignore—namely, the motivation to behave dishonestly—is arguably the more important side of the dishonesty equation.

The motivation side is especially important, in part because the propensity to rationalize is itself a function of the motivation to do so. Given sufficient motivation, people can persuade themselves of almost anything, including why behavior they normally would consider unethical is morally acceptable. Research on the self-serving fairness bias (for a summary, see Babcock and Loewenstein 1997) shows that people tend to conflate what is fair with what is in their personal interest, and the same is no doubt true of people's judgments of what is ethical. Given a sufficiently powerful motivation to commit an act of fraud, in general, people are more than capable of rationalizing why it does not conflict with their own ethical precepts. Furthermore, after people have taken the first step toward unethical behavior, a large body of research shows that subsequent steps into the abyss of immorality become progressively easier (e.g., Lifton 1986; Milgram 1963).

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HYPERMOTIVATION

A closer examination of many of the acts of dishonesty in the real world reveals a striking pattern: Many, if not most, appear to be motivated by the desire to avoid (or recoup) losses rather than the simple desire for gain. A wide range of evidence suggests that people who find themselves "in a hole" and believe that dishonest behavior is the only apparent means of escape are more likely to cheat, steal, and lie. For example, several studies have found that people are more likely to cheat on their taxes when they owe than when they are due for a refund (e.g., Chang and Schultz 1990; Schepanski and Kelsey 1990).

Prospect theory's (Kahneman and Tversky 1979) concept of loss aversion might seem to provide a natural account of what could be called "hypermotivation"—a visceral state that leads a person to take actions he or she would normally deem to be unacceptable. Loss aversion suggests that the motivation to avoid a loss will be greater—approximately two to three times so—than the motivation to obtain a gain of equivalent value, which helps explain why being in a hole produces such strong motivation. However, such simple amplification of value does not fully capture the magnitude of motivation produced by such situations, which often has a powerful emotional component—a feeling of intense misery and desperation. Much as miseries, such as hunger and pain, tend to crowd out altruism (Loewenstein 1996), hypermotivation can cause people to shed, temporarily, the ethical constraints of everyday life.

In a remarkable study of the causes of hypermotivation, Cressey (1950) personally interviewed hundreds of incarcerated embezzlers and pored through large data sets collected by other researchers. He found that such crimes were a response to problems that often began with, as he put it, "gambling, drink, and extravagant living" (p. 739). One prisoner spontaneously came to a similar conclusion:

> The more I think about it, the more I'm inclined to think that before a person does a thing like that he must have done something previously that the community wouldn't approve of. If he's in an environment and isn't leading a double life and doesn't have anything to hide, I can't conceive of him starting with an embezzlement. He has to do something previously. (Cressey 1953, p. 40)

After subjecting his extensive database to an intense scrutiny, which he labeled "negative case analysis," and systematically attempting to challenge his own conclusions, Cressey (1950, p. 742) proposed the following:

> Trusted persons become trust violators when they conceive of themselves as having a financial problem which is non-shareable, have the knowledge or aware-

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> ness that this problem can be secretly resolved by violation of the position of financial trust, and are able to apply to their own conduct in that situation verbalizations which enable them to adjust their conceptions of themselves as trusted persons with their conceptions of themselves as users of the entrusted funds or property.

The rationalizations (or "verbalizations") that Mazar, Amir, and Ariely study play a role in Cressey's framework. However, they are only the final step in a process set into motion when people find themselves in trouble as a result of "nonshareable financial problems."

A further difference between Cressey's (1950) embezzlers and Mazar, Amir, and Ariely's cheaters is how the two evaluate their dishonesty in retrospect. Participants in Mazar, Amir, and Ariely's Experiment 4 realized that they had cheated, but they did not believe that they needed to update the extent to which they viewed themselves as honest. In contrast, Cressey's (1953, p. 120) embezzlers "define themselves as criminals, find this definition incompatible with their positions as trusted persons, and usually condemn themselves for their past behavior." Although rationalizations likely preceded the dishonesty observed both in Mazar, Amir, and Ariely's (2008) laboratory studies and in Cressey's real-world cases, Cressey's findings suggest that serious acts of dishonesty can be rationalized only for so long.

DePaulo and colleagues (2004) observe a similar pattern in a study in which undergraduate students and nonstudent adults were asked to describe the most serious lie they ever told. They found that "the vast majority of serious lies originate with bad behaviors" (p. 164). Unlike the participants in Mazar, Amir, and Ariely's studies, who lied to achieve a modest amount of additional profit, participants in DePaulo and colleagues' study lied to hide extramarital affairs, gambling debts, and other serious transgressions that could jeopardize careers or marriages if revealed. Moreover, DePaulo and colleagues' participants reported feeling distressed while telling their lies, and those who were ultimately caught reported feeling guilty and remorseful. Again, as in Cressey's (1950, 1953) studies, it appears that many of DePaulo and colleagues' participants were ultimately forced to update their self-concept.

The feeling of being in a hole not only originates from nonshareable unethical behavior but also can arise, more prosaically, from overly ambitious goals (Heath, Larrick, and Wu 1999). In the lab, Schweitzer, Ordóñez, and Douma (2004) find that participants who had ambitious goals overstated their productivity significantly more often than participants who were simply asked to do their best. In the classroom, the prospect of falling short of one's own performance goals (Murdock and Anderman 2006) or perhaps parents' goals (Pearlin, Yarrow, and Scarr 1967) appears to encourage cheating. Likewise, in organizational settings, the desire to meet ambitious profit goals often leads to questionable accounting practices (Degeorge, Patel, and Zeckhauser 1999; Jensen 2001; Prentice 2007).

ACADEMIC, HEAL THYSELF

Another important reference point that can lead to the perception of being in a hole is the attainments of others. Research on social preferences has shown that as much as people are loss averse, they are also powerfully averse to inequality (Loewenstein, Thompson, and Bazerman 1989).

Academia is a domain in which reference points are particularly likely to be defined in terms of the attainments of others. Academia is becoming increasingly competitive, and the (professional) achievements of others have never been easier to assess (through online curricula vitae or profiles). The increasing intensity of competition within academia can be felt at all levels. More undergraduate students are entering graduate school with curricula vitae that elicit jealousy from some of their older peers, and the publication requirements for getting a first job are approaching a level that not long ago would have been sufficient for tenure at most institutions. Even journals are becoming increasingly competitive with one another (Huber 2007; Lawrence 2003). With standards ratcheting upward, there is a kind of "arms race" in which academics at all levels must produce more to achieve the same career gains. Some of this increased productivity is enabled by new technology, such as computers and the Internet, and some comes from people putting in longer hours. However, some of it, we fear, comes from researchers pushing the envelope of honesty—or worse.

An unfortunate implication of hypermotivation is that as competition within a domain increases, dishonesty also tends to increase in response. Goodstein (1996) feared as much over a decade ago:

> Throughout most of its recent history, science was constrained only by the limits of imagination and creativity of its participants. In the past couple of decades that state of affairs has changed dramatically. Science is now constrained primarily by the number of research posts, and the amount of research funds available. What had always previously been a purely intellectual competition has now become an intense competition for scarce resources. This change, which is permanent and irreversible, is likely to have an undesirable effect in the long run on ethical behavior among scientists. Instances of scientific fraud are almost sure to become more common.

Whereas recent high-profile instances of data falsification in the medical sciences have received much attention in *Science* (e.g., Couzin and Schirber 2006; Normile 2006; Xin 2006), anonymously self-reported data falsification has recently been documented in fields closer to home as well (in marketing, see Mason, Bearden, and Richardson 1990; in economics, see List et al. 2001). In addition, Martinson, Anderson, and De Vries (2005) measured self-reported misconduct among more than 3000 researchers funded by the National Institutes of Health and found that one-third reported engaging in "questionable research practices" (e.g., dropping observations or data points from analyses because of a gut feeling that they were inaccurate). Surely, the moderate amount of self-reported misconduct is a mere lower bound on the actual amount of misconduct occurring.

CLOSING COMMENTS

The economist Andrei Shleifer (2004) explicitly argues against our perspective in an article titled "Does Competition Destroy Ethical Behavior?" Although he endorses the premise that competitive situations are more likely to elicit unethical behavior, and indeed offers several examples

other than those provided here, he argues against a psychological perspective and instead attempts to show that "conduct described as unethical and blamed on 'greed' is sometimes a consequence of market competition" (p. 414). However, we believe that he makes a fundamental mistake in implicitly viewing greed as an individual difference variable that can be contrasted with market conditions. In contrast to Shleifer, we argue that conditions of extreme competition lead to unethical behavior exactly because they lead to greed—that is, hypermotivation.[1] By raising aspirations above what is possible to attain with normal, moral means, competition creates the psychological conditions for fraud.

Shleifer (2004) concludes optimistically, arguing that competition will lead to economic growth and that wealth tends to promote high ethical standards. We are more pessimistic and, we believe, more pragmatic. Competition may promote progress, but it also inevitably creates winners and losers, and usually more of the latter than the former. The perceived difference in outcomes between winners and losers (e.g., get the job and the good life versus remain unemployed and deprived) has the potential to hypermotivate would-be losers to turn themselves into winners through unethical behavior.

How should society respond to the problems caused by hypermotivation? Unfortunately, practical concerns limit the potential for muting the forces of competition, for example, by offering rewards that linearly increase with performance rather than offering all rewards to a single winner or a small number of winners. What, for example, can companies offer rejected job applicants beyond assurance that the decision was a difficult one and the obligatory promise to keep their resume on file? If making competition more humane is impractical, what can be done to curb dishonesty?

We are not quite as pessimistic as Mazar, Amir, and Ariely regarding the importance of factors identified as important by the standard economic perspective, such as the probability of getting caught and the magnitude of punishment if caught. There is evidence that such factors can be influential (Cox, Cox, and Moschis 1990; Scholz and Pinney 1995), particularly when they are made salient (Ariely, Loewenstein, and Prelec 2003, p. 101). However, we do not believe that the key to deterring fraud lies in increasing the probability of getting caught or the severity of punishment. Instead, we believe that fostering an atmosphere of openness and transparency will be most effective, in part by making it more difficult to commit acts of fraud. In the academic domain, for example, transparency could be promoted by establishing registries that make publicly available the raw data and complete descriptions of methods for both published and unpublished studies. Medical scientists have long advocated the creation of such registries to overcome the "file drawer problem" (Dickersin and Rennie 2003; Simes 1986). We advocate the creation of such registries for the behavioral sciences because they should also offer the added benefit of making it more difficult for researchers to fudge their data.

Some may object to the use of registries on the grounds that they will invariably lower productivity. However, we believe that (slightly) reduced productivity could be beneficial, for at least two reasons. One reason is based on the vicious circle in which fraud and standards act to influence one another: Fraud increases productivity, which in turn raises standards, which in turn stimulates fraud. Curbing research transgressions could break the cycle, reducing productivity and bringing standards back down to earth. The second benefit is that making it more difficult to publish fudged findings would benefit those who otherwise would have based subsequent research on those findings. There is a nonnegligible proportion of findings in our field that is difficult to replicate. Whereas some of these failures to replicate are due to differences in subject populations, to hidden moderators, or to good luck on the part of the initial researchers or bad luck on the part of those conducting follow-up studies, some are surely due to the research misdemeanors or felonies of the original authors. Making it more difficult for researchers to misbehave could reduce the amount of time spent trying and failing to replicate the unreplicable.

[1]Although we essentially equate hypermotivation with greed here, other conceptualizations of greed would not be consistent with what we call hypermotivation. For example, Wang and Murnighan (2007, p. 21) propose that greed "typically starts with inner desire/temptation, i.e., a potential, desirable outcome." In contrast, we propose that hypermotivation is driven by the desire to avoid or recoup losses rather than the desire to obtain positive outcomes.

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Homo Economicus' Soul

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Mazar, Amir, and Ariely's (2008) claim that microeconomic models fail to account for altruism and other social phenomena is not entirely accurate: The neoclassical economist's perspective is only that behavior can be modeled as orderly maximization of utility functions that capture whatever it is that a person cares about (Becker 1991). That said, in recent years, behavioral scientists have conducted a great deal of important experimental work, demonstrating ways that human behavior deviates from the material reward maximizer, "Homo Economicus." Evolutionary biologists played a founding role, specifying mechanisms by which "selfish genes" produce altruistic organisms (Hamilton 1964; Trivers 1971), and experimentalists provided abundant confirmation that benevolent and malevolent social motives are potent (Batson, Fultz, and Schoenrade 1987; Camerer and Thaler 1995) and engage much of the same neural circuitry as other motivations (Sanfey et al. 2003; Tabibnia and Lieberman 2007). Mazar, Amir, and Ariely further suggest that dishonesty is constrained by the unconscious tendency to preserve a favorable self-image. The logic of this "self-signaling" mechanism is as follows: (1) People value a particular conception of their own self; they want to possess certain traits and qualities (some of which are "moral"); (2) people infer their own traits in much the same way they infer the traits of others (Bem 1965; Mead [1934] 1962); and thus (3) people's behavior is in part shaped by wanting to provide evidence (to themselves) that they possess the desirable traits.

We agree but note that neglect of self-signaling in most economic models is not a mere oversight; there are difficulties inherent in quantifying self-signaling motivations. As Mazar, Amir, and Ariely suggest, people treat new diagnostic information about their personal qualities in self-serving ways, exploiting ambiguity and ignoring evidence when possible to allow cheating that "flies below the radar." Specifically, they suggest that if a person takes a little extra from the proverbial cookie jar, even in the absence of risk of external punishment, there is a cost to bear in terms of potentially aversive diagnostic information indicating a dishonest self. What complicates matters is that this cost may be reduced or avoided through diversion of attention

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